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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003892

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON  
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/10/2014  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: TACHIRA STATE: VISIT TO THE VENEZUELAN BORDER

Classified By: A/DCM Abelardo A. Arias for Reason 1.4(d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) working near Venezuela's border with Colombia described the refugee situation as a growing political problem, particularly in the face of increasing security concerns on the border, during Poloff's visit to Tachira State December 13. The director of the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman in Tachira State also told Poloff that gaining cooperation from other government agencies to assist refugees hampered by security concerns. There has been good response on necessities, she said, but the legal system lags behind. End Summary.

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Conditions of a Refugee Town  
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2. (C) Poloff visited a Colombian immigrant town of 6,000 to 8,000 people close to the Venezuelan border town of Urena December 13. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) field worker Marisol Suarez introduced Poloff to five Colombian women living in the town, at least four of whom were seeking refugee status. Living conditions varied from brick shanties to wood and plastic bag constructions, depending on the length of time a family had been there. Some had arrived as recently as three months ago, while others had more than four years living there. Two of the women's homes had provisionary water collection tanks, one had unreliable electricity.

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UNHCR: Refugees and Security  
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3. (C) UNHCR field officer Markku Aikomus said that as of December 13, almost 3,800 Colombians had requested refugee status in Venezuela, and approximately 1,500 of those were in Tachira. Aikomus said that traditionally most Colombians crossing the border came in small groups and assimilated into the local population, so only three or four towns like Urena existed in Tachira. In the face of growing security concerns on the border, Aikomus said, police and National Guard authorities are becoming increasingly suspicious of Colombians, alleging that many are guerrilla or paramilitary. Aikomus conceded it is hard to distinguish between genuine refugees and irregular forces. He pointed out the inconsistency between the authorities' alleged concern about who was coming across the border and the GOV's lack of funding and focus on identifying individuals crossing the border.

4. (C) Aikomus also reiterated concern, expressed by UNHCR regional representative Maria Virginia Trimarco in early December, about the radio statement made by the General in charge of the Theater of Operations in Apure State where he linked UNHCR activities to the CIA. Aikomus said if the rumor became widespread, it could effect both the security of UNHCR's employees and its ability to do its job.

5. (C) Aikomus asserted that he had seen a notable deterioration in the security situation on the border and an increased presence of paramilitary forces in the past year. Aikomus said he feared a backlash in the Venezuelan community that has traditionally been accepting and helpful towards refugees and Colombians crossing the border. Aikomus said some Venezuelans worried about the deteriorating security situation are linking the Colombians to pro- or anti- GOV efforts. Aikomus said some Venezuelans blame President Hugo Chavez's alleged affiliation with the FARC for his ignoring the deteriorating security situation on the border. Others, he said, blame the U.S. backing of Colombian security forces for pushing the conflict into Venezuela. Others still blame the Colombian population directly for helping President Chavez defeat the opposition in the August 15 referendum.

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Caritas

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16. (U) Mercedes Ascano, the Caritas field office director in San Cristobal told Poloff that about 70% of the people

Caritas helps in Tachira State were on the border, while 30% were dispersed throughout local communities in the interior of the state. While security is a concern for Caritas workers, Ascano said she felt protected by the people Caritas helps. After two years in the field, Ascano said the relationship with the National Guard and police had improved because Caritas was becoming more recognizable. Ascano asserted that of the approximately 300 refugee cases that have been adjudicated in 2004, all the applicants were from Caracas where the National Refugee Commission headquarters is located, or from Tachira State where the GOV,s local refugee Technical Secretariat office accepts applications. She lamented that the Technical Secretariat refugee field offices that were supposed to open in bordering Apure and Zulia State, where almost 60% of the refugee applications come from, were still conceptual rather than a reality.

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Defensoria: Defending People's Rights  
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17. (C) Ilia Medina, the director of the Human Rights Ombudmans (Defensoria del Pueblo) in Tachira State, told Poloff December 14 that gaining cooperation from other government agencies to assist refugees was slow, but that that was to be expected because the work was long-term. Medina claimed that the most progress had been made in the areas of water, electricity and transportation. The prosecutor's office, the judges and the court system, she said, were the most resistant to the Defensoria,s intervention and requests for information. The deteriorating security situation in Tachira made the job more difficult because employees never knew who the person they were requesting information or an accounting from was associated with (guerrilla, paramilitaries).

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Comment  
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18. (C) Security was a consistent topic of conversation in each meeting. While the refugee workers did not cite incidents, the atmosphere of uncertainty makes their work more difficult. The clearest sign of progress is that the GOV has adjudicated nearly 10% of the requests for refugee status; progress that exacerbation of the security situation on the border could easily stymie.  
Brownfield

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